

# Chapter 3

## The Mandate of Heaven: *The Classic of History*

(c. 1700 B.C.E.)  
Anonymous

### Introduction

The Shu Jing, or The Classic of History, is the oldest complete work among what are known as the five Confucian classics. The five classics were canonized as the basic elements of the Confucian educational system during the second century B.C.E., when the books were reconstructed by order of several emperors of the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.-220 C.E.). Already ancient in Confucius's day, the current version is probably essentially the same text that Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) knew, studied, and accepted as an authentic record of Chinese civilization.

The Classic of History is a collection of documents spanning some seventeen hundred years of Chinese history and legend, from 2357 to 631 B.C.E. The document that appears here was composed in the age of Zhou but purports to be the advice given by the faithful Yi Yin to King Tai Jia, second of the Shang kings. According to the story behind the document, when the first Shang king, Cheng Tang, died around 1753, his chief minister, Yi Yin, took it upon himself to instruct the new, young king in the ways and duties of kingship and the workings of the Mandate of Heaven.

The Mandate of Heaven was a political-social philosophy that explained the success and failure of monarchs and states down to the end of the empire in 1912 C.E. Whenever a dynasty fell, the reason invariably offered by China's sages was that it had lost the moral right to rule, which is given by Heaven alone.

### Questions to Consider

- According to the Mandate of Heaven, what are the most important lessons that history teaches? What does this reveal about the significance of ancestors in Chinese society and culture?
- What must King Tai Jai do in order to become a successful ruler?

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In the twelfth month of the first year ... Yi Yin sacrificed to the former king, and presented the heirking reverently before the shrine of his grandfather. All the princes from the domain of the nobles and the royal domain were present; all the officers also, each continuing to discharge his particular duties, were there to receive the orders of the chief minister. Yi Yin then clearly described the complete virtue of the Meritorious Ancestor for the instruction of the young king.

1 He said, "Oh! of old the former kings of Xia cultivated earnestly their virtue, and then  
2 there were no calamities from Heaven. The spirits of the hills and rivers likewise were all in  
3 tranquility; and the birds and beasts, the fishes and tortoises, all enjoyed their existence  
4 according to their nature. But their descendant did not follow their example, and great Heaven  
5 sent down calamities, employing the agency of our ruler who was in possession of its favoring  
6 appointment. The attack on Xia may be traced to the orgies in Ming Tiao. ... Our king of Shang  
7 brilliantly displayed his sagely prowess; for oppression he substituted his generous gentleness;  
8 and the millions of the people gave him their hearts. Now your Majesty is entering on the  
9 inheritance of his virtue; -- all depends on how you commence your reign. To set up love, it is  
10 for you to love your relations; to set up respect, it is for you to respect your elders. The  
11 commencement is in the family and the state....

12  
13 "Oh! the former king began with careful attention to the bonds that hold men together. He  
14 listened to expostulation, and did not seek to resist it; he conformed to the wisdom of the  
15 ancients; occupying the highest position, he displayed intelligence; occupying an inferior  
16 position, he displayed his loyalty; he allowed the good qualities of the men whom he employed  
17 and did not seek that they should have every talent....

18  
19 "He extensively sought out wise men, who should be helpful to you, his descendant and  
20 heir. He laid down the punishments for officers, and warned those who were in authority, saying,  
21 'If you dare to have constant dancing in your palaces, and drunken singing in your chambers,--  
22 that is called the fashion of sorcerers; if you dare to set your hearts on wealth and women, and  
23 abandon yourselves to wandering about or to the chase, -- that is called the fashion of  
24 extravagance; if you dare to despise sage words, to resist the loyal and upright, to put far from  
25 you the aged and virtuous, and to seek the company of ... youths, -- that is called the fashion of  
26 disorder. Now if a high noble or officer be addicted to one of these three fashions with their ten  
27 evil ways, his family will surely come to ruin; if the prince of a country be so addicted, his state  
28 will surely come to ruin. The minister who does not try to correct such vices in the sovereign  
29 shall be punished with branding.'...

30  
31 "Oh! do you, who now succeed to the throne, revere these warnings in your person.  
32 Think of them! -- sacred counsels of vast importance, admirable words forcibly set forth! The  
33 ways of Heaven are not invariable: on the good-doer it sends down all blessings, and on the evil-  
34 doer it sends down all miseries. Do you but be virtuous, be it in small things or in large, and the  
35 myriad regions will have cause for rejoicing. If you not be virtuous, be it in large things or in  
36 small, it will bring the ruin of your ancestral temple."